

Oregon Health Authority Media Briefing, June 17, 2022

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Good morning, I'm Dr. Dean Sidelinger, health officer and state epidemiologist at Oregon Health Authority. Thank you for joining us for this update on the state's continued response to COVID-19.

Today I'm joined by Dr. Dawn Nolt, professor of pediatrics (infectious diseases) in the OHSU School of Medicine, who will provide an update on the anticipated arrival of COVID-19 vaccines for young children, possibly by this coming Monday.

This month marks the third summer of living with COVID-19. Some Oregonians will continue to feel the loss of family members and friends to this disease, and we acknowledge those losses even as many of us get together to enjoy pleasant weather and renewed connections. As we get ready for summer activities, all of us can continue take basic steps to protect ourselves and loved ones, as we support others who might be recovering from COVID-19 illness or dealing with long-term symptoms.

For many families, the start of summer this year began with cherished events they had to cancel or change the past two years, such as school graduations for all ages. We know the pandemic has been especially hard on families with children, schools and educators, who sacrificed tremendously. Thanks to our early childhood and K-12 school staff for their work in providing consistent access to in-person instruction, and for keeping our schools and young people safe while helping our students succeed. I also want to thank my public health and health care colleagues for their continued tireless work to keep us safe and healthy as we continue our battle with COVID-19.

Today, I will highlight our latest data. I will also discuss OHA's ongoing efforts to keep Oregonians informed and safe. This includes statewide access to safe and effective vaccines and boosters, as well as therapeutic treatments. Finally, I will outline the schedule for the expected authorization of vaccines for the youngest children – 6 months to 5 years – our last group to receive protection from COVID-19 vaccines.

Since our last update May 18, COVID-19 cases appear to be leveling in our state. Test positivity rose slightly from 11.4% on May 16 to 11.7% on June 14. During the last month, daily reported case counts also have leveled, from a rolling seven-day average of 1,401 cases reported on May 16, to 1,487 reported on June 14. We assume these numbers are a dramatic undercount of the actual number of cases because we know many people are using at-home tests and not reporting the results. We also know many others are not getting tested. Trends in this state and around the country tell us there are higher levels of transmission.

With our community and university partners, OHA can monitor the spread of the virus through our wastewater surveillance system in more than 40 communities. Those systems also tell us we are seeing a high level of spread that is similar to what we detected during the Delta and Omicron surges.

Data for the total number of Oregon's hospitalized patients with COVID-19 show they should not exceed our hospital system's ability to care for them. Since our May 18 update, hospitalizations have gradually climbed, from 255 COVID-19-positive patients reported on May 16 to 290 reported on June 14.

Oregon Health & Science University's modeling team, headed by Dr. Peter Graven, forecast that the number of COVID-19-positive patients in Oregon's hospitals likely have peaked at 327 on June 5. This is less than one-third seen during the Delta and Omicron waves, when we had peaks of 1,178 on Sept. 1 and 1,130 patients on Jan. 27, respectively. OHA continues to track COVID-19 hospitalizations and support our state's hospital systems. We remain ready to respond to any future surges.

OHA also continues to track the prevalence of COVID-19 variants and their impacts on Oregonians and our health system. Our hospitalization numbers have shown a steady increase in numbers with BA.2 Omicron as the dominant variant since March. Evidence still shows that current vaccines, combined with high levels of vaccination and recent previous infections with the virus, offer strong protection to prevent severe illness for most people. OHA and our partners continue our surveillance of new subvariants, such as BA.4 and BA.5. Nationally and in the Pacific Northwest, they account for less than 20% of all tested samples.

The good news is that far fewer people are getting seriously ill with COVID now than during our previous surges. However, trends tell us people are still getting

sick. Just last week, on June 9, the CDC released its weekly update on COVID-19 community levels, and three counties in Oregon moved into high transmission levels. While those three counties have moved back to medium this week, three additional counties are on the CDC's high level this week.

These latest developments remind us that the pandemic hasn't ended. If you are connecting with others outside of where you live, you are at risk of exposure. This can be at work or school, at events with friends and family, or during summer travel.

The tools widely available are keeping most of us safe. Being up to date with your vaccinations - including boosters - is the best way to prevent serious disease, including hospitalization and even death. Vaccines are widely available in clinics, pharmacies and at vaccine clinic sites.

For people who are older and adults of all ages at high risk who do get COVID-19, a highly effective treatment is available in the form of a pill, called Paxlovid. Information about Paxlovid and other treatments can be found on OHA's COVID-19 website.

OHA also strongly recommends that anyone who may be at increased risk because of age and underlying health conditions make a plan now about how and where they will get tested and receive treatment, if they become ill. Those who don't have a health care provider may contact their local health center or call 211.

Finally, we can't forget about the benefits of masks. For those at high risk, or for folks who care for or who live with someone at high risk, wearing a mask in indoor public places offers extra protection. Wearing a mask in areas with higher transmission offers everyone extra protection.

Before I wrap up and turn to Dr. Dawn Nolt for comments, I want to highlight a development that many Oregon families with young children have waited for that she will discuss in more detail.

As of today, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has expanded Emergency Use Authorization of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for children 6 months to 4 years and the Moderna vaccine for children 6 months to 5 years. The CDC will complete its

review this weekend, along with the Western States Scientific Safety Review Workgroup.

This is the last group of residents who have not been able to receive the protection provided by vaccines. This is a big group, too. In Oregon, the population of children age six months to five years is about 230,000.

Both vaccines have been tested in clinical trials that involved thousands of children and continued for several months. Both proved to be safe in children. Though rates of COVID-19 are lower in children, children can still get infected and become very sick. The rate of hospitalization for COVID-19 for children younger than 5 soared during the Omicron peak in early 2022 — five times higher than during the Delta wave of 2021, according to the CDC.

Once the Western States reviews the FDA and CDC authorization and recommendations, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines for youngest children could be available as early as June 20 through providers who are open on the Monday Juneteenth federal and state holiday and who are prepared to offer vaccines. Parents who want to vaccinate their youngest children are advised to call their health care provider to check on vaccine availability first.

I'd now like to introduce Dr. Dawn Nolt from Oregon Health & Science University to provide some remarks on why COVID-19 vaccines are important for our youngest children and information for families who have children who may soon become eligible to be vaccinated.

Remarks by Dr. Dawn Nolt:

Thank you, Dr. Nolt. Because Monday is a holiday, it may take a few days for the vaccine to reach all providers. If the vaccine is recommended this weekend, allocations of doses will prioritize equity for underserved groups, and ensure the vaccine gets to all parts of the state.

Our Field Operations Team is working with partners to develop a list of children with disabilities who may need vaccinations in their –homes.

Parents will be able to get vaccines for their children through their pediatricians, and through local public health authorities, federally qualified health centers, and through vaccination clinics and other community events.

Finally, thanks again to our public health, education, pharmacy and health care partners who continue to serve the people of Oregon. Thanks also to everyone who continues to protect themselves, their families, their co-workers and neighbors. Being vaccinated and up to date with your vaccines remains your best shield against severe disease. By supporting each other, particularly those who remain at elevated risk, we will be able to navigate this latest chapter with the fewest possible disruptions to our lives.

And with that, we can now take some questions.